

JOHN GEDDIE: MESSENGER OF THE LOVE OF CHRIST IN EASTERN MELANESIA

October 23, 2007 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org; for instructions about subscribing and unsubscribing or changing addresses, see the information paragraph at the end of the article) -

The following is an abbreviated edition of "John Geddie: Messenger of the Love of Christ in Eastern Melanesia," from *Blazing the Missionary Trail* by Eugene Harrison, Scripture Press, c. 1949:

Hideous shrieks and unearthly wails shattered the stillness of the night.

"Do you hear those horrible cries?" asked the missionary's wife.

"Yes," her husband replied. "Someone has died and, after the custom of this dark island, a relative is being strangled."

Shortly after dawn, on a beach nearby, they saw a group of natives casting into the sea the body of the man who had died a few hours earlier and also the body of his wife who had been strangled. Hastening to the shore, the missionary spoke pointedly to the natives about the wickedness of their conduct. Some of them, having for sometime been under Christian instruction, joined in the condemnation, and then set about to locate the actual murderer. In a few minutes the party returned, dragging the culprit. Seeing the white man he cried out: "Have mercy! Let me go and I will never again strangle a woman."

After an earnest talk with the guilty man, the missionary told the natives to release him. This they were at first unwilling to do, saying that he should be tied to a post for several days while he was flogged and lectured.

"No," said the white man. "Force will not do. Only the compulsion of love will avail. Was it not the love of Christ that softened your hard hearts? Use no weapon but that which our Redeemer uses, the weapons of love. Let us constantly keep our hearts open 'unto Him that loved us and washed us from our sins.'"

There we have the man and the text. The man was John Geddie, the year 1851, the place the New Hebrides [Vanuatu] and the text which wrote such a magnificent history, Revelation 1:5: "Unto Him that loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood." Like the Apostle John's his all-absorbing theme was the love of Christ. The stirring annals of John Geddie's life may be summed up in three episodes: the love of Christ captivated his young heart; the love of Christ animated his missionary labors; the love of Christ irradiated all his day.

EARLY LIFE AND CONVERSION

John Geddie (1815-1872) was born in Banff, Scotland, April 10, 1815. His father, a watch and clockmaker, was a devout member of the Presbyterian Church. During the great revival under the Haldanes, an Independent Church was formed in Banff. Mr. Geddie attached himself to this church and served as a deacon. His wife, Mary Menzies, the mother of the future missionary, was of a pious Secession family. To this worthy couple four children were born -- three daughters and a son.

In 1816 Mr. Geddie emigrated with his family and settled in Pictou, Nova Scotia. Young John and his sisters got their early education in "Hogg's School," so named after the Scotchman who was the teacher. John was an active boy and an eager student. The details of his conversion are not on record. Like John Bunyan, he was powerfully convicted of sin and for some time considered himself beyond the possibility of salvation. Eventually, the love of Christ banished the terrors of the law and on June 22, 1834, at the age of 19, he united with the Presbyterian Church.

Even prior to this, his favorite pastime was the reading of books and articles telling of the triumphs of the gospel in certain far-away places and of the desperate need of the gospel in other vast areas. After completing grammar school and later the Pictou Academy, he entered upon the study of theology. Geddie was small of stature and was often referred to, both at this period and later, as "little Johnnie." His health having seriously declined, he faced the prospect of being compelled to give up the ministry. At this time he solemnly dedicated himself to the Lord, vowing that if his health were restored and the way opened, he would go with the message of salvation to some heathen land. March 13, 1838, he was ordained as pastor of a congregation on Prince Edward Island. The following year he was married to Charlotte McDonald.

THE FIRST MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE OF THE COLONIAL CHURCHES

While assiduously devoting himself to his pastoral duties, Geddie sought to promote the idea that a Colonial Church might and should engage aggressively in foreign mission work. This was a new idea, for up to this time churches in the British Colonies, instead of sending missionaries abroad, were seeking financial aid for their own work from their brethren in other lands.

Thousands of hearts were stirred to action by his impassioned plea: "To undertake a mission to the heathen is our solemn duty and our high privilege. The glory of God, the command of Christ and the reproaches of those who have gone to perdition unwarned, call us to it. With 600,000,000 of immortal souls as my clients, I beg you to arouse yourselves and to take a worthy part in this noble enterprise which seems destined, in the arrangement of God, to be instrumental in achieving the redemption of the world."

The church at length committed itself to the establishment of a mission in the South Seas and accepted Mr. and Mrs. Geddie as their first missionaries. Mr. Geddie's mechanical abilities and his knowledge of medicine peculiarly fitted him for work on a pioneer field among Melanesian and Polynesian savages. The two missionaries and their children sailed from Halifax on the 30th of November, 1846. In his parting message Geddie declared: "In accord with the Redeemer's command and assured of His presence, we are going forth to those lands where Satan has established his dark domain. I know that suffering awaits me. But to bear the Redeemer's yoke is an honor to one who has felt the Redeemer's love."

SETTLING DOWN AMONG THE SAVAGES

On October 17, 1847, after a journey of more than 20,000 miles, the vessel sailed into the harbor of Pango-pango [Pago Pago] Samoa. While awaiting transportation to Eastern Melanesia, Geddie devoted six months to the study of the Samoan language. This knowledge would be of great value to him in communicating with the Samoan teachers who had already been settled on several of the Melanesian islands.

Geddie, "the father of Presbyterian missions in the South Seas," landed on the island of Aneiteum [Aneityum], of the New Hebrides group, in 1848. When the John Williams sailed away, the missionaries felt for the first time the stern reality of being abandoned on an island surrounded by a barbarous people from whom they had much to fear and with whom they had little, if anything, in common. But were they despondent? "Though severed now from those with whom we could take sweet counsel," wrote Geddie, "we are not alone. We have His promise, at whose command we have come hither, 'Lo, I am with you alway.'"

Mr. and Mrs. Geddie were soon engrossed in learning the Aneiteumese tongue. The difficulty of the task was increased by the fact that the language had not been reduced to writing and no dictionaries or books of any kind were available. After mastering Aneiteumese, the first assignment was to reduce it to writing and then to print some materials to help enlighten the people.

When Geddie first reached Aneiteum, there were two Samoan teachers, Simeona and Pita, on the island but there was not a single native convert. The people of Aneiteum, like those throughout the New Hebrides, looked like savages. Geddie found that the painting of the face was a universal custom. Each person painted according to his own particular fancy and every one's face had a hideous, if not ludicrous, appearance. The men wore their hair long, while that of the women was cropped short. A man's hair was his chief pride. It was smeared with a red paint and divided into a large number of long, twisted locks. As many as 700 of these locks were counted on one head.

The cutting of an enormous hole in the ear was common. The holes were ordinarily filled with tortoise-shell rings or pieces of wood or flowers, though some natives could be seen with a fig of tobacco protruding through one ear and a pipe through the other. The practice of boring the cartilaginous section of the nose was also prevalent. A piece of wood or polished stone was inserted horizontally, with the result that the nose was greatly distended. The women wore a girdle made of the Pandanus leaf, while the men were practically naked.

The people also acted like savages. The female sex was very degraded. The wife was practically the slave of her husband and to her lot fell the drudgery and hard labor. The practice of killing unwanted babies was common. When a man died, his wife was immediately strangled so that her spirit might accompany his to the next world, and any children too young to take care of themselves suffered the same fate as the mother. If there was a grown son, he was expected to perform the act of strangulation.

The revolting practice of cannibalism was prevalent on all the islands. The natives confessed that they considered human flesh the most savory of foods. It was considered proper to eat all enemies killed or taken in war. It was a common occurrence for chiefs to kill some of their own subjects to provide a cannibal feast, if the bodies of enemies were not readily obtainable. The missionary knew a man who killed and ate his own child!

The people were steeped in moral degradation. Licentiousness was rife, revenge was considered a sacred duty, forgiveness was a word not to be found in the language and the spectacle of a happy heathen family, bound together by ties of love, was unknown. And their religious beliefs were not calculated to elevate them. Their deities included idols and spirits called Natmasses. Their sacred men were invested with remarkable powers, such as producing thunder and lightning, causing hurricanes and inducing disease. "Can we indeed expect anything good from the poor heathen," wrote the missionary, "when their deities are supposed to be such as themselves, or, rather, are conceived as having attained to a more gigantic stature in every form of vice than man can possibly reach?"

Geddie conceived of himself as being on a campaign of conquest for his Lord. Aneiteum was his base of operations, while his parish extended across the vast reaches of Eastern Melanesia with its multitudinous isles.

The severest heartaches came when his children, one after another, had to be sent to the homeland for their education and when little Alexander, three years old, sickened and died.

As Geddie went through the forests and over the mountains on his evangelistic tours, numerous attempts were made to kill him. Stones, clubs and spears were hurled at him, and several times he was injured. But he kept on telling of the Redeemer's love and exemplifying it in his actions.

One day Geddie came upon a group of women wailing piteously and rubbing a man's corpse with broken leaves. Some were pulling their hair and shrieking violently. The man's widow, an attractive young girl, sat near by expecting to be strangled. Geddie said, "This woman must not be killed," and started leading her from the scene. Immediately some men assaulted him, knocked him to the ground and seized the young widow. While some of the women held down the girl's arms and legs the men proceeded to strangle her. When Geddie again tried to intervene, men with clubs drove him away. The murderous deed was by this time completed. Knowing that the savages were infuriated and that he was further risking his life, he warmly told the people of the foul darkness of their deed. "According to our custom and belief, this is right. Be gone before we kill you!" they shouted. Then he began to tell them of that wondrous love which led the Son of God to give up the praise of the angels for the mockery of men, to exchange the diadem of the ages for a crown of thorns, and to die on the cross that the dark-hearted sinners of earth might be changed and received at last into the heavenly home. As he spoke, clubs were lowered and the people became wistfully attentive, for there is something even in a savage breast that responds to the story of the Saviour's suffering love.

NATIVE CONVERTS HAZARD THEIR LIVES FOR THE GOSPEL

Geddie sought, too, to train converts to go forth as Christian teachers and evangelists. After years of patient seed-sowing and cultivation, the missionary began to reap some precious sheaves. From the first he taught the converts that they were saved to win others. Reinforcing his teaching with action, he took them with him on his weekly tours through the island and encouraged them to witness for their Lord to their countrymen.

He taught all his converts to read and love the Word of God. As they developed in the Christian life, he imparted to them his vision of evangelizing the teeming populations of other islands. Scores of them volunteered in the spirit of Isaiah, "Here am I, send me!" and went forth to hazard their lives for Christ on other dark islands. Many of them "loved not their lives even unto death" and perished as martyrs on a foreign shore. Only eternity will reveal the full story of the magnificent heroism of these humble men and women who, like their beloved missionary, impelled by the love of Christ, went forth to labor, suffer and die, sustained by the presence of their Lord and soothed by the assurance that some day the seeds they had sown would be blessed of God to produce a harvest of precious souls.

Natives from other islands were encouraged to visit Aneiteum. Years of labor and prayer brought an amazing transformation on the island. Let Geddie's Journal speak: "For many months after our arrival almost every day brought some new act of theft to light, and altogether we lost property to a considerable amount; but now locks and keys are entirely useless. The natives who attended our Sabbath meetings used to come with their clubs and spears and painted visages; but now we seldom see a weapon on the Sabbath day, and

the habit of painting is falling into disuse. I have seen the day when a man who wore a garment was the sport of others, but now every rag in the community is in requisition on the Sabbath day. All this were nothing, however, except as evidence of a change of heart wrought by the Spirit of God."

One day Yakanui, a chief and sacred man, came to the missionary. Yakanui was a human monster, the greatest cannibal on the island. There were very few children left in his district, because he had killed and eaten so many of them. Many grown persons had also fallen under the impact of his murderous club. He was hated by the people, yet feared because of his ferocity and because they believed he possessed mysterious powers by which to bring ruin upon them. Attracted by the gospel of forgiving love, he came to the missionary, who tenderly pointed him to the Redeemer who is "able to save unto the uttermost."

Schools were established in all parts of the island. The New Testament, then the whole Bible, was translated and put into the hands of the people. Hundreds, then thousands, broke with heathenism and turned to Christ, and twenty-five churches were crowded with eager worshippers each Lord's Day.

THE DEATH OF A FRUITFUL MISSIONARY

When, after twenty-four years of toil, he answered his Lord's final summons and left the earthly scene, December 14, 1872, a tablet, prepared in Sydney, was placed behind the pulpit of the church in Anelcauhat where the beloved missionary so long had preached. On it was the following inscription:

"In memory of John Geddie, D.D., born in Scotland, 1815, minister in Prince Edward Island seven years, Missionary sent from Nova Scotia to Aneiteum for twenty-four years. When he landed in 1848, there were no Christians here, and when he left in 1872 there were no heathen."

The life of John Geddie and his monumental accomplishments in Eastern Melanesia, especially on Aneiteum, constitute an everlasting memorial to the power of the love of Christ to transform savages into saints and the abodes of barbarism into a possession of the Lord.

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